For decades, city planners have seen the future of public transportation in maglev trains – “maglev” being short for magnetic levitation. Instead of conventional steel railroad track, maglev trains glide above the track, making for a faster and smoother ride. Since the 1980s, short test tracks have been built in Japan, China, Germany, South Korea, and England, though few have survived to the present day.

However, Japan – in particular, the Central Japan Railway Company, or JR Central – has pushed ahead with its maglev technology. In 1990, JR Central began construction on a test line in Yamanashi Prefecture, and began extensive testing on an 18.4 km (11.4 mile) section in 1997. By 2013, the line was extended, and JR Central began offering test rides to select members of the public the following year. This test track allowed for speeds of 500 kph (311 mph), fast enough to travel from Tokyo to Osaka in 48 minutes.

To establish itself as a world leader in railway technology, Japan looked to export their newly-matured system. The United States seemed to be the perfect market, though it would be a tough nut to crack.

The U.S. is unique in its approach to mass transit. Due to its more spread-out nature, planes are the preferred method of travelling from city to city, even with all of the inconveniences of modern air travel. One place that isn’t spread out, however, is the Northeast Corridor, an area stretching from Boston to Washington, D.C. Here, 17% of the country’s population lives in an area that makes up 2% of its land. Highways in the area are struggling to handle the growing traffic capacity, with traffic congestion increasing 24% in the major NEC cities from 1990 to 2007 (1). Interstate 95 in Washington, D.C. was rated by INRIX as the worst traffic hotspot in the United States, with 1,384 traffic jams in 2017, lasting an average of 33 minutes. (2)

Worse, America’s rail infrastructure is aging, and the federal government is reluctant – even loathe – to spend money to upgrade it or build new track. There is only one high-speed rail service in the United States, the Acela Express, which takes passengers across the Northeast Corridor at speeds up to 150 mph, and even then, it can only reach that speed intermittently due to track congestion. Amtrak, the U.S. federal rail operator, borrows the majority of the track it operates from freight lines, who give their trains higher priority than Amtrak’s.

The only alternative would be to build new track, which would take on nearly-insurmountable economic, environmental, and legal challenges.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became personally involved in selling the maglev to the U.S., meeting directly with then-President Obama to license the maglev technology to the U.S. for free for the first 40-mile section – Washington D.C. to Baltimore.

A previous attempt at a Washington-to-Baltimore maglev had stalled in 2003 after the Maryland Senate introduced a bill to block any further spending on the project. However, the new effort would be entirely backed by a private company, The Northeast Maglev, headed by Wayne Rodgers. TNEM raised capital from JR Central, the Federal Railroad Administration, and the state of Maryland to fund its first round of impact studies.

In November 2015, the project scored a major coup. The group charged with project development, Baltimore Washington Rapid Rail, applied for – and received – a long-abandoned railroad franchise, which granted them the authority of eminent domain. Alarm bells rang in the towns that lay along the proposed route.

There was still the matter of where to build. By January of 2018, project planners narrowed the list of possible routes down to two – both of which would tunnel through swathes of Prince George’s and Anne Arundel County. The city of Greenbelt would be hit especially hard, as most of the city is covered in green space.

As the months passed, the maglev gained significant local opposition. Many feared that the construction process would create excessive noise, and worse, introduce more pollution than the train system sought to eliminate. Some fail to see how it will even reduce D.C.’s infamous traffic congestion. With only three stops on the route – Baltimore, BWI Airport, and Washington – the suburbs would be left only to stare at an expensive white elephant.

Soon, even town and state officials joined in on the opposition. One prominent opponent is Greenbelt city councilman Colin Byrd, who has repeatedly appeared at anti-maglev events wearing “Stop This Train” buttons. Another opponent is state delegate Jimmy Tarlau, district 47A, who believes that the state’s money is better spent on improving currently-existing public transportation.

On October 6th, the Citizens Against This SCMaglev, together with the Greenbelt Advocates for Environmental and Social Justice, held a rally outside of Veterans Memorial Park in Bladensburg. Protesters held “Stop This Train” signs toward passing cars and buses, some of whom honked their horns in support of the cause. Other supporters passed out flyers and buttons.

In February 2019, the maglev organizers will release their next Environmental Impact Statement, which will give a clearer picture of the future of the project. With the re-election of Governor Larry Hogan, the maglev’s most prominent supporter will still be around to back it up.